THE STORY

The City of Seneca's original water system, built in 1895, included construction of a 65 feet deep and 34 feet in diameter well. This well located, in what became the "city park block", was topped with a bridge and enclosed with a round steep slopped shingled roof. The entire structure was surrounded by a chain link fence about 20 years ago. Except for minor exterior maintenance it was ignored.

In April 1989 the Seneca Fire Department, planning for it's centennial celebration, July 14 & 15 of 1990, encouraged the city council to refurbish the "Old Well" as a tourist attraction. A local contractor finally agreed in March 1990 to undertake the restoration project on a labor and materials basis. Even then he would not start until the city clerk drew plans and wrote specifications. These were reviewed, as a courtesy, by a Wilson & Co. engineer.

Restoration work began in early April 1990 and was completed May 14th. It is a unique experience to stand above a 65 foot well and listen to the water seep into the storage basin. The first electric pump is still in place on the bridge. Originally the bridge was little more than planks on top of two 15" I beams.

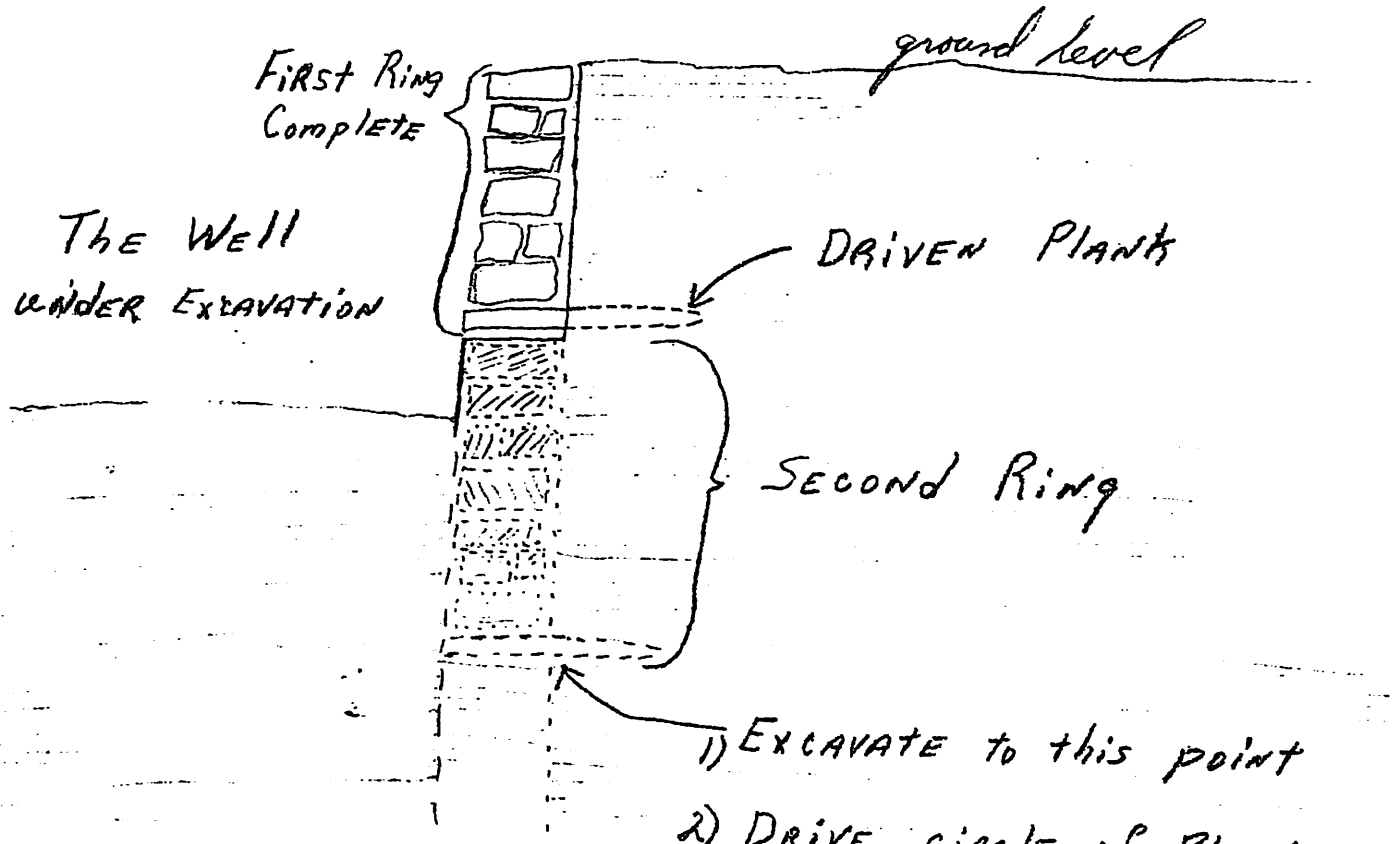
The character of this structure was retained but is now enclosed for visitor safety. Heavy plexiglass from the bridge deck to the railing, allows children to view the well and prevents any objects falling thru. The area above the railing is enclosed with a pipe and welded wire cage. This is constructed in such a way as to allow visitors to lean over the rail and look directly into the well.

(PLEASE SEE DRAWINGS AND SPECIFICATIONS FOR MORE DETAIL)

The "Old Well" is the last visible sign of Seneca's original water system, installed in 1895. Many of the original water mains are still in use suppling water to the citizens, and of course are not visible.

Construction of a 65 ft. deep by 34 ft. diameter, rock lined well, was a major undertaking and labor intensive. The rock walls were obviously laid in about 4 ft. high sections beginning at ground level. (SEE ENCLOSED SKETCH) Heavy planks are still visible beneath each such section. These planks were sharpened (tapered) on one end and driven about 3 ft. out into undisturbed soil. A ring (section) of wall was laid upon the exposed inner ends of the planks. After the mortar had set in the first ring the well was dug another 4 ft. deep. Soil was removed, from under the driven planks, to allow the next section of wall to be laid directly under the ring above. The process was repeated several times until the well was approximately 50 ft deep. At that point the diameter was decreased about 3 ft. forming an offset ledge in the rock wall.

Digging probably became more difficult once the water table was reached. Water had to be pumped out to allow for continued digging and wall construction. Soil instability, within water bearing strata, may have been the reason well diameter was decreased. If the soil was too unstable, driven planks could not have supported a wall section while the succeeding ring was dug out and laid.


ground level
First Ring Complete
The Well under Excavation
Driven Plank
Second Ring
1) Excavate to this point
2) Drive circle of Planks
3) Lay up wall to bottom of planks above.

This is a sketch of how the original specifications may have been drawn.

OLD WELL INFORMATION (AND CITY PARK)

Block 34 was purchased by the city, in two transactions, during April and May of 1895. Lots 1 through 12 were purchased April 18th, 1895 for $872.00. (See ordinance No. 191.) Lots 13 and 14 were purchased May 6th, 1895 for $133.33. (See ordinance No. 195.)

City council minutes of April 10, 1895 recorded: "Decision was made to locate a city well on the west side of the city."

The bid of James T. Broughhal, of Kansas City, MO., to build a waterworks was accepted. The project was to start within ten days of April 15th, 1895 and to be completed within four months. The bid price was $29,200.00.

WELL FACTS: 34 feet across - 65 feet deep

Water depth is approximately 25 feet and has remained at that level since at least 1979. (No records of measurements, if any, are known since the well stopped being used for human consumption.) This well is now being used to water the golf course fairways.

The old well was probably discontinued about 1937 when wells number 1 and 2 and the one million gallon reservoir were built. Wells 1 and 2 are east of Seneca and the reservoir is on First Street. The original 85,000 gallon standpipe, located southeast of the "old well", continued to be used until its replacement in 1976 by the one-half million gallon water tower.

Water was pumped from the old well by engine driven pumps. These pumps were in pits located inside a brick Water Works building located southwest of the well. The building was razed in the late 1950's after being used many years for storage.

On July 19, 1899 "specifications for deepening the pump pit at the Seneca Water Works" were approved. Those specifications also state: "This well also requires a new tunnel from the pump pit to the well. This and the lowering of the engines will be considered separately". The tunnel is not evident today, but probably entered the southwest side of the well where the pipe is still in place.

More information is being researched about how the well was constructed. Such information will be incorporated into a future handout. We invite and encourage you to return to Seneca as we develop more public knowledge of this historic engineering and construction project from the 19th century.

Bits of Information Recently Discovered: J. T. Broughal was granted several time extensions. On October 22nd, 1895 the city council voted to acquire "pumps and machinery to complete the well". On January 22nd, 1896, Charles Bradshaw was paid $200.00 for use of tools, clamshell, engine and boiler used while completing the Water Works.